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Cormac McCarthy's Aesthet(h)ics of the "Canal-Rhizome" in *Suttree*

Marie-Agnès Gay

1 "*Cross here.... To a darker town.... Encampment of the damned*" (3; original italics), the anonymous voice of the prologue in Cormac McCarthy's 1979 novel *Suttree* invites the reader. Doing so, the latter walks in the footsteps of the eponymous hero of the novel, a college-educated man who has abandoned his wife and child to settle in McAnally Flats, Knoxville's slum area on the Tennessee River, a marginal space peopled by tramps, drunkards and outlaws whose life Suttree has decided to embrace. If the exact motivations that drew Suttree to "travers[e] the border from Knoxville's genteel society and higher classes into the world of McAnally Flats" (Walsh 34) remain unclear, his—obviously free-willed—endorsement of social liminality stands out as a rebellious reaction to his father's conservative value system based on law and order, on the binding strata of "the State Apparatus" (Deleuze and Guattari 24). Indeed, Suttree chooses each of the alternate modes of being evoked by Deleuze and Guattari in the following passage from *Mille plateaux*:

> Let us consider the three great strata concerning us, in other words, the ones that most directly bind us: the organism, signifiance, and subjectification. The surface of the organism, the angle of signifiance and interpretation, and the point of subjectification or subjection. You will be organized, you will be an organism, you will articulate your body—otherwise you're just depraved. You will be signifier and signified, interpreter and interpreted—otherwise you're just a deviant. You will be a subject, nailed down as one, a subject of the enunciation recoiled into a subject of the statement—otherwise you're just a tramp. (159)[1]

2 Suttree's crossing to the darker area of McAnally Flats is a transgressive act he assumes serenely, without any of "[t]he dread in his heart [he felt when] he feared his father in the aftermath of some child's transgression" (152). Choosing to live in a "*city constructed on no known paradigm, a mongrel architecture... in a brief delineation of the aberrant disordered and mad*" (3; original italics), he truly proves a "fugitive of all order" (4).

3 However, what matters in the novel is not so much the hero's initial decision to settle in a marginal territory, a potentially sterile vengeful *act*, as, once this clear and pointed move

has been effected, his embarking on a course of constant deterritorialization, to be understood as an ethical *process*. Indeed, Suttree's life among the destitute of this world becomes one of endless and directionless wandering, but also of existential in-betweenness. If McCarthy's works betray "an awareness of borders" (Busby 144), the latter often become porous with the protagonists' repeated crossings. This is the case in *Suttree*, its hero's frequent uncompleted or pointless crossings symbolically adding to his choice of social liminality. In parallel, the reader's first clear passage from the paratextual zone of the prologue marked in italics to the main body of text may be said to be his last, as the narrative is so construed that many formal demarcations are blurred or erased; the reader is thus exposed to uncertain textual space that aims to sap the very principle of borders. Providing close textual analysis, I will contend that form matches content as Cormac McCarthy makes an aesthet(h)ic commitment by deciding to give his novel the fluid form of a "rhizome" which, in Gilles Deleuze and Félix Guattari's words, "is composed not of units but of dimensions, or rather directions in motion. It has neither beginning nor end, but always a middle (*milieu*) from which it grows and which it overspills" (21).[2]

4 This process of deterritorialization will be analyzed on both the diegetic and textual levels by concentrating in turn—although they necessarily overlap—on two of its most striking expressions: an aesthet(h)ics of ambulation and an aesthet(h)ics of in-betweenness. Lastly, I will consider how the novel, which like all McCarthy's powerful works is "at the center… about ontology and epistemology" (Busby 141), requires that the focus be shifted from an ethical plane to a metaphysical one, the novel's aesthetic choices also echoing McCarthy's obsessive exploration of the perennially uncharted mysteries of life and death.

1. "First he left the roads, then the trails": An Aesthet(h)ics of Ambulation

> In my father's last letter he said that the world is run by those willing to take the responsibility for the running of it. If it is life that you feel you are missing I can tell you where to find it. In the law courts, in business, in government. There is nothing occurring in the streets. (McCarthy, *Suttree* 13-14)

5 Suttree's life among the downtrodden of McAnally appears as a never-ending contradiction of his father's assertion. Not only does much occur in its streets, but Suttree's leisurely walking through them in haphazard and therefore always renewed itineraries makes the father's circular use of the verb *run* suggest a sense of dead-endedness and sterility.[3] His mazelike wandering among and beyond "the shapeless warrens of McAnally" (295) appears as rebellious behavior since vagabonding (reduced to its deviant form "vag[-ging]") is twice referred to as an offense for which one can get arrested: "What did they have you for? / Vag. You know. They got me once before" (223); "They'll vag you here, said the black" (293). Suttree thus "shares with his friends the badge of a rebelliousness that borders on criminality" (Young 98). Moreover, although often alcohol-ridden ("Somewhere beneath him his feet were wandering about" [77]—here seeming to deny any agency on Suttree's part), ambulation first and foremost appears as Suttree's militant mode of living, to the point of becoming a means of self-definition:

> Are ye lost?
> I [Suttree] think I know what state I'm in. I doubt you can direct me out of it. You're

> lost or crazy or both.
> Quite so.
> ...
> You're loony as a didapper, he said.
> At least I exist, said the wanderer [Suttree]. (288)

6 Ironically, the shortcut that Suttree finds to the city market, one of his recurrent destinations, is "a winding path with cinder paving that angled up behind old homes of blackened boarding and old porches where rusted skeins of screening fell down the rotting facades" (66). Stylistic choices prove mimetic as the alliteration with plosives hinders progression and embedded prepositional phrases and subordinate clauses lengthen the journey. Furthermore, Suttree eventually renounces the shortcut: "he no longer took the near path but went the longer way round by the streets" (66). In general, whenever an act of crossing is involved, its meaningfulness seems to be negated in one way or another, as in the following example: "It took him all day to cross the state. ... Toward evening he was in a nameless crossroads high in the Cumberland Mountains" (160). The missing name blurs the idea of signposting usually associated with crossroads, and onomastics confirms hindered progress. More strikingly, the verb *cross* or the preposition *across* hardly ever signal a movement toward a set destination; they are rather the prelude to further movement, usually erratic trajectories where the accumulation of varied spatial prepositions or adverbial particles paradoxically triggers a sense of disorientation, and dilutes the potential force behind the signifier *cross*:

> The path he followed wound along the hills through grass and bramble and cut crosscountry toward the lower reaches of the river. It angled down a long bank of shale, it went through a wood. When he came upon the river again it was upon a dead and swollen backwater of coves and sloughs.... He went along the narrow path past fishermen, old women and boys....
> He went down a strand....
> The path ran on to a landing.... (121)

7 Such examples are countless, the effect being sometimes reinforced through the thematization of these spatial markers, which foregrounds the fact that one never crosses a definitive line nor moves to a fixed point or destination: "He crossed the street at the top of the hill and went through the rimey grass toward the post office. Down the long marble corridor and out the far side. Up this alley" (168). In the next example, the preposition *across*, which opens the sentence, is likewise deflated through the end-focus on *beyond*: "Across a smoking alluvial strewn with refuse to the faint rise of the railtracks and the river beyond" (99).[4] In a recent essay, Louise Jillett reads the character of Suttree through Walter Benjamin's concept of the "flâneur," a "fluid, mobile figure" (146), and writes: "Suttree is always in a state of moving on, passing through" (143). Reversing the order of Jillett's formulation into "in a state of passing through, moving on" could be a way of expressing the always transient nature of, and therefore basic lack of *sense* in the act of passing through fixed lines in the novel.

8 It is significant that the chapter that takes place in the Smoky Mountains, and which depicts Suttree's initiatory journey into the forest, should reproduce the same endless chain of spatial prepositions and adverbial particles, downplaying the crucial importance given to border crossings in such metaphorical journeys. The added meaning one could read, for instance, in the sentence "[t]hat afternoon he crossed the watershed and started down through a dark spruce forest" (284)[5] is not borne out by the text, as here again the act of crossing, being but one in a long series of spatial movements, does not mark an essential stage in Suttree's hike. However, although seemingly erratic, the journey does

lead Suttree to an epiphanic revelation: "In these silent sunless galleries he'd come to feel that another went before him.... He saw with a madman's clarity the perishability of his flesh" (287). Haphazardness and indirection thus prove to be the condition of authentic progression. This is the case until the very ending of the novel, significantly open-ended as it describes Suttree's leaving McAnally towards an unknown destination:

> Then they were moving.... Out across the land the lightwires and roadrails were going.... Off to the right side the white concrete of the expressway gleamed in the sun where the ramp curved out into empty air and hung truncate with iron rods bristling among the vectors of nowhere. (471)

9 As William C. Spencer writes in an article that traces Suttree's initiatory journey into the Smoky Mountains back to the tradition of the Native American vision quest, "[r]egardless of where he goes, Suttree is most interested in traveling the path of the seventh direction" (107), which the critic explains is a reference to tribal elders' smoking their pipes to six spatial directions (west, north, east, south, up to the sky and down to the earth), the seventh direction going from the Great Spirit to one's inner being. The seventh direction thus appears as that which, if one is to reach one's innermost truth, has to escape the fixity of cardinal points.[6]

10 As Suttree surfaces from "the fevered deeps" induced by typhoid, he awakens to find that "[t]he priest's... angular face leaned over him.... A cool thumb crossed his soles with unction" (460). In the context of the novel, the blessing gesture through the sign of the cross would seem to attempt to wash Suttree's feet clear of their sinful vagrancy. Yet the hero is impervious to all forms of authority. David Holloway, in his book *The Late Modernism of Cormac McCarthy* (2002), underlines

> Suttree's suspicion of Catholicism, his distaste for the dogmatic fixing (and freezing) of meaning.... [Its] dogmas obscur[e] an existential absence of purpose, order, or determinate meaning, in a world where all truths are merely provisional..., and where any attempt to map the hermeneutic depths of existence—as Gene Harrogate finds out to his cost in the tunnels below Knoxville—is both self-defeating and potentially totalitarian. (12)

11 Suttree's symbolic acts of resistance are many, and often pertain to water. His sinking of a police car that he has stolen into the river (441) is highly significant as it literally neutralizes law's arresting force in the boundless flow of water. As for his incessant going back and forth on the river, the latter a clear symbol of "the mysterious flux at the heart of existence, of everything that Knoxville attempts to deny" (Grammer 21), it clearly redoubles the motif of fluidity. Furthermore, Suttree is often described watching the shimmering reflections of light on the water, as in: "[he] sat in the dark and watched the lights on the far shore standing long and wandlike in the trembling river" (112). A paragraph where the narrative voice tries to capture the indefinable shades of man's emotions ends with these words: "The color of this life is water" (415). In their ephemeral immediacy, the mutant forms of water reflections that dart in all directions defy any attempt at arresting their shapes.[7]

12 The novel's narrative trajectory invites the reader onto a similarly directionless journey and taunts them with likewise elusive lines of meaning. Two formal devices deserve underlining. First, the episodic structure of the book, with its scenes described in "component vignettes" (Holloway 176), challenges any sense of teleological progress, the reader erring in and out of—tellingly unnumbered—chapters, "episodic tangents" (Guillemin 4) which fail to accrue into any sort of clear construction. Many early reviewers noted "the sprawling structure of the lengthy story" (Arnold and Luce 6), while

Witek signals "a multitude of echoes... [which do] not permit a pull toward conclusion [yet permit] variations which are not only endless, but endlessly daring" (85). These comments recall the figure of the rhizome which, "unlike trees or their roots,... connects any point to any other point" (Deleuze and Guattari 21).[8] If each new chapter usually marks the recounting of a new event, the repetitive nature of most scenes and their inconsequential organization prevent each entry into a new chapter—a threshold crossing—from turning into a very significant move. What Deleuze writes in his essay on Walt Whitman in *Critique et clinique* (1993) applies here: "Selecting singular cases and minor scenes is more important than any consideration of a whole" (77).[9] *Suttree* likewise comes close to allowing a random reading. This is what writer Madison Smartt Bell recalls of his first discovery of the novel: "It was a big sloppy novel and you didn't really have to approach it in an organized way. You could start reading it anywhere" (2). Beatrice Trotignon, in an article on textual borders mostly focused on *The Road*, similarly mentions how she found herself "chaptering [*Suttree*] out with [her] own signposts, all the while thinking that [she] was tampering with the very experience of borderlessness or textual dump... the book had created" (123).[10] In Deleuze and Guattari's terms again, McCarthy's aim is undeniably to do away with conventional "compositions of order" in favor of a narrative "assemblage" that turns the book's fragments "into components of passage," "more fluid" narrative "matter" (Deleuze and Guattari 109-110).[11] And indeed, Jerome Charyn stated in *The New York Times Book Review*:

> The book comes at us like a horrifying flood. The language licks, batters, wounds—a poetic, troubled rush of debris. It is personal and tough, without that boring neatness and desire for resolution that you can get in any well-made novel. (qtd. in Arnold and Luce 6-7)

13 Secondly, narration is so conceived as to sometimes lead the reader onto wrong tracks. In particular, the often-uncertain referent of the pronoun "he" at the beginning of chapters or sections, which the reader usually takes to point to the hero only to discover that it instead refers to other characters, is not only one more element in the complex network of doubles that peoples the novel nor a mere stylistic device meant to signal the hero's identity crisis; it clearly functions as a stylistic red herring that diverts the reader from a linear reading. This occurs as early as chapter two: confident that the narrative still focuses on Suttree, the only logical referent of the opening "He" at this stage (30), the reader grows increasingly disturbed as the unfolding of the story belies this logical interpretation and fails to clarify the situation. Only in the following chapter is the "he" clearly identified as Gene Harrogate, a simpleton sent to jail where he meets Suttree who, in the course of an apparently banal dialogue, resurfaces, unannounced (41). Readers realize that the intervening pages since the opening of chapter two have probably led them to retrace their steps with an analeptic episode, which fills an informative gap in the first chapter about Suttree's experience of internment (19). Such a narrative contrivance turns our reading progression into a hesitant one for the rest of the novel, as each new chapter or section beginning with a not clearly identified "he" seems to open uncertain paths of interpretation. The text thus echoes Deleuze and Guattari's invitation:

> Always follow the rhizome by rupture; lengthen, prolong, and relay the line of flight; make it vary, until you have produced the most abstract and tortuous of lines of n dimensions and broken directions. Conjugate deterritorialized flows. (11)[12]

14 Meanwhile the reader is not unlike Harrogate who, as he starts tunneling underground in quest for a *bon coup* (breaking into a bank's safe), is described "sighting courses from stone to stone to reckon by and charting with his crazed compass a fix of compounded

errors" (260). In this book conceived as a "canal-rhizome,"[13] getting off the track is inevitable for there are no points or positions in a rhizome but only lines, as Deleuze and Guattari remind us. (8) Further on in *Mille plateaux*, they insist:

> Where are you going? Where are you coming from? What are you heading for? These are totally useless questions.... [They] all imply a false conception of voyage and movement (a conception that is methodical, pedagogical, initiatory, symbolic...). But [there is] another way of traveling and moving: proceeding from the middle, through the middle, coming and going rather than starting and finishing. (ibid. 25)[14]

2. "'Aint the law I don't reckon are you? / No. I live in that houseboat yonder'": An Aesthet(h)ics of In-Betweenness

15 According to David Holloway, "[t]he city in which the narrative unfolds is more a process than it is a place" (140), and it should be noted that Suttree's choice of a living place within the marginal neighborhood he has made his home doubly foregrounds liminality: not only does he live on a houseboat, the very embodiment of in-betweenness,[15] but the latter is moored just next to a bridge, the span of which regularly attracts Suttree's gaze. Suttree will also encourage his friend Harrogate to move in under a viaduct, "a smaller replica of the river bridge [standing] astraddle of First Creek" (115). In keeping with his apparently favorite moments of temporal juncture, dawn or dusk, noon or midnight,[16] the bridge embodies the hero's obsession with intermediate spaces which suspend one into a neither here nor there. Indeed, what matters is not the vectorized crossing from one point to another that the bridge allows,[17] but rather the construction itself—a space "between worlds"—and the endless going back and forth that it harbors in its middle, a dynamic Deleuzian *middle* which expresses Suttree's conviction that all is movement: "Nothing ever stops moving" (461). This middle should not be confused with the frozen *center* of rigid forms, which Suttree's uncle, a putative Father and as such a representative of the Law, tellingly seeks when, uneasy, he enters the liminal space of the houseboat: "He stopped in the center of the room, arrested in the quadrate bar of dusty light" (15).

16 The prologue ends with the image of a disincarnated watcher on a bridge[18] and the motif of the bridge itself symbolically spans the novel: it is foregrounded in the very first lines of the first chapter ("Under the high cool arches and dark keeps of the span's undercarriage where pigeons babble and the hollow flap of their wings echoes in stark applause." [7]) and at the very end ("He went back out and sat on the rail. He watched the river.... Pigeons came and went beneath the arches of the bridge... [465]), two passages that clearly echo each other. It is also a recurring motif throughout the novel, as when, upon returning to his houseboat after his failed attempt at living in a "regular" if shabby apartment in McAnally, Suttree's first action is to set off down the river to run his fishing lines; tellingly, the end of the chapter reads: "[he sculled his skiff] slowly down beneath the bridge. As he passed under he raised his head and howled at the high black nave and pigeons unfolded fanwise from the arches and clattered toward the sun" (415). The bridge, a liminal space of suspension, appears as the locus of unbridled movement.[19]

17 It may thus be assumed that when McCarthy chooses again and again to suspend the reader in liminal formal spaces, this is evidence of an aesthet(h)ic process of emancipation and liberation. Many critics have noted the way the novel hovers between

incompatible and unresolved opposites: "*Suttree* combines a picaresque quest for survival with a modernist quest for truth, a baroque style with existential despair.... It places philosophical meditations side by side with the most mundane detail," Georg Guillemin explains (6, 15), while for Terri Witek:

> Cormac McCarthy... combines the furthest reaches of both educated and rustic dictions. [He] moves effortlessly from the laconic dialogue of hill characters and street people, and from cleanedged, understated narration, to descriptive sections... dense with learned vocabulary and refined linguistic effects. (73)

18 Robert L. Jarrett considers that "in *Suttree* we are often uncertain of the boundary between realistic representation, hallucination, imaginary vision, and dream" (55). And indeed, what is noteworthy is not so much the coexistence of opposite modes as the fact that they are not demarcated by clear boundaries, the reader thus often evolving in "interstitial wastes" (4)—to use an expression from the prologue—as they must go back and forth, sometimes hesitantly, from one formal configuration to the other. This is particularly true of narratological shifts, on which I am going to focus here.

19 The transcription of dialogues for instance does away with the conventional use of quotation marks or hyphens to signal direct discourse. The use of paragraphing to separate the characters' lines offsets this lack, yet resorting to such a device allows for smoother movement from narrative discourse to dialogues, all the more so as the first words spoken in a dialogue are usually not marked by such paragraphing. The first example in the novel, after three pages of dense description, reads:

> The fishermen had made to go when someone in the crowd took his elbow. Hey Suttree.
> He turned. Hey Joe, he said. Did you see it?
> No. They say he jumped last night. They found his shoes on the bridge.
> They stood looking at the dead man. (9-10)

20 We can see here how the last sentence, which marks a shift back to narrative discourse, runs parallel to the last line of dialogue made up of descriptive speech, the absence of clear signposting as the reader crosses a formal boundary favoring possible confusion. Systematically dropping the typographical markers of direct speech can be interpreted to be a symbolical, not to say militant, stylistic choice as such markers are generally referred to through metaphors of demarcation.[20]

21 The same is at stake with shifts in point of view. Let us first mention the few and apparently random changes to the perspectives of secondary characters in a text predominantly characterized by Suttree's internal focalization:[21] fluid movement in and out of the dominant perspective gets the upper hand over strict narrative logic. David Holloway provides an enlightening analysis of another element:

> McCarthy's tendency to switch the point of view, quite abruptly at times, between the omniscience of a third-person narrator who charts Suttree's embeddedness in the commodity landscape and the heightened sensory apparatus of the protagonist himself, as he responds to the object world and inscribes it with subjective meaning. (118)

22 Holloway convincingly links this process to "McCarthy's seizing of the practico-inert, and its aesthetic conversion from a condition of fixedness to one of fluidity" (121). More disturbing for the reader are the shifts in enunciation, from third-person to first-person. The first of those occurs as memories of his childhood and of his grandfather surface in the mind of Suttree, who is resting on his cot. It catches the reader unaware about ten pages into the novel, in a passage that stretches from "[h]e turned heavily on the cot and

put one eye to a space in the rough board wall" (13) to "[i]t was late evening before he woke" (14).[22] Many elements, listed in the following lines, work against a clear sense of moving from one mode to the next: the shift to first-person voice occurs in a sentence that deceptively begins with a *he* ("He arched his neck to tell to me some thing. I never heard" [13]); the grandfather's last words are transcribed in free direct speech, making it only retrospectively possible to reconstruct their enunciative origin as well as that of the I ("The dead would take the living with them if they could, I pulled away" [13]); Suttree looks back at himself as a distant persona at the very moment of interior monologue ("A rimpled child's face watching back" [13]); Suttree's memories are of a very allusive nature, in particular the first hints at his still-born twin brother, recalled in a mixture of complex lexis and oral idiom:

> The infant's ossature, the thin and brindled bones along whose sulcate facets clove old shreds of flesh and cerements of tattered swaddle. Bones that would no more than fill a shoebox, a bulbous skull. On the right temple a mauve halfmoon. ... Perhaps his skull held seawater. Born dead and witless both or a terratoma grisly in form. No, for we were like to the last hair. I followed him into the world, me. (14)

23 The ellipsis in the quotation above marks a return to standard third-person narration for a few lines ("Suttree turned and lay staring at the ceiling" [14]), a description which recalls the first sentence of the passage ("He turned heavily on the cot and put one eye to a space in the rough board wall" [13]). However, it is also superimposed with the next use of the pronoun *he* ("He lies in Woodlawn, whatever be left of the child with whom you shared your mother's belly" [14]), which refers to Suttree's twin brother and therefore marks the return to interior monologue, introduced this time by self-address in the second-person singular. If such an uncertain narrative configuration matches the half-awake / half-asleep state of the protagonist and his confused sense of identity, I contend that it also partakes of a wider intent in the general economy of the novel, all obviously done to have the reader progress in a state of constant in-betweenness.

24 When the next shift of the same kind occurs,[23] once again during a climactic moment of identity crisis, Suttree is walking the streets. This time a scene anchored in immediate reality becomes the pretext for narrative liminality, the whole passage being further complicated by a previous shift to narration in the present tense, another device recurrently used and which participates in the general shift of narrative grounds. The novel, in keeping with its indefinite yet "hauntingly powerful" conclusion (Jarrett 59), ends on a sudden and unprepared shift to first-person and present tense, which brings reading to a close with these two modes peripheral to the novel, and suspends us in a state of aesthetic liminality:

> Then they were moving.... When he looked back... [an] enormous lank hound had come out of the meadow by the river like a hound from the depths and was sniffing at the spot where Suttree had stood.
> Somewhere in the gray wood by the river is the huntsman and in the brooming corn and in the castellated press of cities. His work lies all wheres and his hounds tire not. I have seen them in a dream, slaverous and wild and their eyes crazed with ravening for souls in this world. Fly them. (471)

25 This *excipit* leaves us with an allusion to death which a disincarnated I, reminiscent of that in the prologue, bids us, *in extremis*, to shun. This final address to the reader seems in contradiction with the novel's opening pages that invited us to cross to "the encampment of the damned" (3). Indeed, the reader's somber journey through the book has regularly brought us to the brink of the other world, in the wake of Suttree, who not only escapes a

close demise after a bout of typhoid fever, but whose life is one of constant interrogation of the mysteries of death.[24]

3. "Lumbering eternally toward the edge of all": Suttree's Metaphysical Quest

26 Suttree's ambulatory journey into marginal and liminal spaces and McCarthy's resorting to formal vagaries cannot be reduced to the aesthet(h)ic dimensions underlined so far, and invite reappraisal. Indeed, Suttree's journey clearly turns into "an ontological odyssey" (Guinn 110) as he adopts a meditative stance, and "[his] ruminations come to center around... fundamental questions of being" (Young 101). Suttree is regularly depicted contemplating the skies as his quest opens him to a more profound questioning of the very nature of being and of the meaning of human life within the larger universe: "The enormity of the universe filled him with a strange sweet woe" (53). This leads him to feel the boundaries of his self dissolve: "dark closed over him so absolute that he became without boundary to himself, as large as all the universe and as small as anything that was" (274-275). As he yields to fasting-induced hallucinatory musings during his Smoky Mountains stay,

> [h]e scarce could tell where his being ended or the world began nor did he care. He lay on his back in the gravel, the earth's core sucking his bones, a moment's giddy vertigo with this illusion of falling outward through blue and windy space, over the offside of the planet, hurtling through the high thin cirrus. (286)

27 It thus appears befitting that his houseboat should start tilting,[25] in perfect symbiosis with the earth which, in another hallucinatory and somewhat ironical vision, he sees tipping "slightly on its galactic axes" under "the floodtide of screaming fiends and assassins and thieves and hirsute buggers" released from Hades by "the archetypal patriarch himself" (457). Although Suttree is at one point described as standing in his little room "one foot wide to shore himself against the tilted floor" (371), rarely does he try to resist the force of this tilting, this decentering pull which brings him as close as possible to the essence of life:

> He lay in his bed half waking.... A barge passed on the river. He lay with his feet together and his arms at his sides like a dead king on an altar. He rocked in the swells, floating like the first germ of life adrift on the earth's cooling seas, formless macule of plasm trapped in a vapor drop and all creation yet to come. (430)

28 It also brings him close to the essence of death, as proved by the superimposition of the image of a recumbent statue with that of an embryonic form of life.

29 Obviously, Suttree's knowing of the existence of his dead twin brother, or in Thomas D. Young's words, "the magnitude of feeling himself twinned with a creature consigned to the parallel universe of death" (101), accounts for the constant conflation of these two opposed states. It cannot be denied that the protagonist, in a way, is unconsciously courting death. His seeking liminality as a mode of excess, besides being driven by a transgressive will, appears suicidal. As Deleuze and Guattari suggest in *Mille plateaux*, self-destructions, without the necessary caution, can come close to a death drive:

> Every undertaking of destratification... [must] observe concrete rules of extreme caution: a too-sudden destratification may be suicidal, or turn cancerous. In other words, it will sometimes end in chaos, the void and destruction, and lock us back into the strata, which become more rigid still, losing their degrees of diversity, differentiation, and mobility. (503)[26]

30 Yet, despite this uncontrolled suicidal dimension to Suttree's obsession with death (which can partly be accounted for by the traumatic circumstances of his birth), the latter is also clearly linked to his bent towards relentless metaphysical questioning, as in the following:

> Curious the small and lesser fates that join to lead a man to this [death].... For [Callaghan] perhaps it all was done in silence, or how would it sound, the shot that fired the bullet that lay already in his brain? These small enigmas of time and space and death. (375-376)

31 It is telling that the man he muses over in this passage should actually not be dead, but only dying (he will die five hours later after much agony). Suttree indeed seems to have a prescience that the essence of life is a state in-between life and death: "Death is what the living carry with them. A state of dread, like some uncanny foretaste of a bitter memory" (153). What Suttree is truly obsessed with is the blurred border between life and death, man—whose body is metaphorized as a "boat of flesh" (288)—appearing as nothing but a vessel on its way to death. The river and the bridge, with their emphases on liminality, thus also prove apt symbols of Suttree's awareness of death-in-life. As explained by Young:

> Among the... river debris, he frequently notes shoals of bobbing condoms and, on more than one occasion, "*the beached and stinking forms of foetal humans*" (4, 306). Such is the elemental but apparently accidental organization of being and not-being at their source, as between Suttree's form and that of his dead twin. And it is the gravity of this impression that keeps placing Suttree himself up on the bridge, wondering what it would be like "To fall through dark to darkness. Struggle in those opaque and fecal deeps, which way is up" (29). (102)

32 Suttree's attraction to water calls to mind Gaston Bachelard's famous book *Water and Dreams: An Essay on the Imagination of Matter* (1942). Here Bachelard argues that water represents the highest possible form of dissolution[27] and notes that "[w]ater mingles its ambivalent symbols of birth and death" (122; my translation).[28]

33 On a formal level, McCarthy multiplies non-finite sentences (through the use of progressive verb forms, past participles or infinitives, to the exclusion of conjugated forms) and verbless clauses, which is a potent way to conjure up this suspended in-between state that defines humanity. This recurrent syntactical pattern first matches Suttree's haphazard mode of living as the absence of conjugated verbs seems to deprive his actions of any kind of pointedness, as in the following passage where progressive forms and nominal fragments regularly supersede sentences in the preterit when the narrator describes Suttree's visit to the market:

> Market Street on Monday morning. Knoxville Tennessee. In this year nineteen fifty-one. Suttree with his parcel of fish going past the rows of derelict trucks piled with produce and flowers.... Past hardware stores and meatmarkets and little tobacco shops. A strong smell of feed in the hot noon like working mash. Mute and roosting peddlars watching from their wagonbeds....
> He went among vendors and beggars and wild street preachers haranguing a lost world....
> He passed under the shade of the markethouse....
> He went over the cool tiles, his heels muted by sawdust and woodshavings.... Suttree wandering among the stalls. (66-67)

34 However, there is more to McCarthy's use of such a syntactical design, as clearly appears in a passage where Suttree anticipates his own death:

> He surveyed the face in the mirror, letting the jaw go slack, eyes vacant. How would he look in death? For there were days when this man so wanted for some end to things that he'd have taken up his membership among the dead; all souls that ever were, eyes bound with night.
> Climbing again these stairs with their tacked runners of worn carpet.... Down the hallway to the door with no name where he lived. (405)

35 The two paragraphs take us from life to death to death-in-life—the use of the verb "lived" at the end connoting first and foremost a material address—by way of non-finite and verbless clauses that deprive the character, and the text, of true momentum. The symbolic weight given to this syntactical scheme is made clear from its being used in the novel's inaugural sentence and paragraph:

> Peering down into the water where the morning sun fashioned wheels of light.... A hand trails over the gunwale and he lies athwart the skiff, the toe of one sneaker plucking periodic dimples in the river with the boat's slight cradling, drifting down beneath the bridge and slowly past the mudstained stanchions. Under the high cool arches.... Glancing up at these cathedraled vaultings..., the bridge's slant shadow leaning the width of the river.... These shadows form over the skiff, accommodate his prone figure and pass on. (7)

36 This incipit is clearly reminiscent of the myth of Charon, who transports the souls of the deceased across the rivers Styx and Acheron separating the world of the living from the world of the dead. It is noteworthy that the only conjugated verbs in this opening paragraph have an inanimate subject, except for "he lies athwart the skiff" where the verb of position is that used on tombstones; the skiff is nevertheless associated with the motif of the cradle. Suttree is therefore from the first a spectral figure, a presence and an absence, and McCarthy's obsessive resorting to non-finite forms subtly comes to express his very mode of being, in-between life and death, the essence of our human condition.

37 Furthermore, with this context in mind, it becomes obvious that the compulsive motifs of vagrancy and liminality studied in the first two parts of this essay have far-reaching metaphysical implications. Just as Suttree's ambulatory existence and constantly in-between positioning enable him to approach, asymptotically, the utmost mystery, the text's rhizomic mode is the condition of our sharing this experience. A "composition of order" (Deleuze and Guattari 110) could not provide us with an insight into the essence of life, of death, of death in life. When Suttree is in the hospital and about to die, the description of his experience of near death is evoked as follows:

> He was going again in a corridor through rooms that never ceased, by formless walls unordered unadorned and slightly moist and warm through soft doors with valved and dripping architraves and regions wet and bluish like the inward parts of some enormous living thing. A small soul's going. By floodlight through the universe's renal regions. Pale phagocytes drifting over, shadows and shapes through the tubes like the miscellany in a waterdrop. The eye at the end of the glass would be God's. (461)

38 Tellingly, this description of a loose and fluid architecture could also be read as a metatextual allusion to the novel itself.

39 Disorder and its would-be marginality, all the way to insanity, are what can bring us to the core of human experience and to its ultimate, if elusive truth. Deleuze in his essay on "Bartleby, the Scrivener: A Story of Wall Street" (1853) in *Critique and clinique* evokes "the Excluded from Reason, without our being able to know if they do not exclude themselves willingly from it, in order to obtain what it cannot give them, the imperceptible, the unnamable with which they will be able to merge" (105; my translation).[29] *Suttree* is

peopled with such figures, and it is through their acquaintance that the protagonist thirsts for an inkling of truth:

> he saw an idiot [who] looked out upon the alley with eyes that fed the most rudimentary brain and yet seemed possessed of news in the universe denied right forms, like perhaps the eyes of squid whose simian depths seem to harbor some horrible intelligence. All down past the hedges a gibbering and howling in a hoarse frog's voice, word perhaps of things known raw, unshaped by the constructions of a mind obsessed with form. (427)

40 The novel's loose structure and its ethical and philosophical rejection of rigid forms are what allows its "raw knowledge of the universe" (Guinn 113). When Suttree visits his aunt in a "madhouse," the text reads:

> He'd never been among the certified and he was surprised to find them invested with a strange authority, like folk who'd had to do with death some way and had come back, something about them of survivors in a realm that all must reckon with soon or late. (431)

41 This passage is of course proleptic of Suttree's near experience of death at the end of the novel, Suttree who seems to have himself boarded the novel's Boschian *Ship of Fools*. With the creation of this original and powerful figure, and of a free-floating and no less potent text, it may be argued that McCarthy prolongs what Deleuze considers to have been the founding act of the American Novel: "to carry the novel away from the path of reason(s), and to bring to life these characters who stand in nothingness, only survive in the void, retain to the end their mystery and defy logic and psychology" (*Critique et clinique* 105; my translation).[30]

42 Suttree is our guide to this "realm that we must all reckon with soon or late," (431) but the novel concedes in its very last sentence that it should be as late as possible: "Fly them [the hounds of death]" (471). This text which is obsessed with death thus grants us a new lease on life. It achieves this throughout since, if it provides us—in its diegesis and its form—with an inkling of the mystery of death, it does so in a way which also allows for a *vital* experience of reading. As in this often-quoted passage, the text opposes the sterile and deathly language of the law to the inventive and vivid power of ambulant language:

> Mr Suttree it is our understanding that at curfew rightly decreed by law and in that hour wherein night draws to its proper close and the new day commences and contrary to conduct befitting a person of your station you betook yourself to various low places within the shire of McAnally and there did squander several ensuing years in the company of thieves, derelicts, miscreants, pariahs, poltroons, spalpeens, curmudgeons, clotpolls, murderers, gamblers, bawds, whores, trulls, brigands, topers, tosspots, sots and archsots, lobcocks, smellsmocks, runagates, rakes, and other assorted and felonious debauchees. (457)

43 The canal-rhizome has us float towards death while keeping us moving with the buoyancy and fluidity of life, one of the aporetic powers of this novel.

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NOTES

1. "Considérons les trois grandes strates par rapport à nous, c'est-à-dire celles qui nous ligotent le plus directement : l'organisme, la signifiance et la subjectivation. La surface d'organisme, l'angle de signifiance et d'interprétation, le point du subjectivation ou d'assujettissement. Tu seras organisé, tu seras un organisme, tu articuleras ton corps – sinon tu ne seras qu'un dépravé. Tu seras signifiant et signifié, interprète et interprété – sinon tu ne seras qu'un déviant. Tu seras sujet, et fixé comme tel, sujet d'énonciation rabattu sur un sujet d'énoncé – sinon tu ne seras qu'un vagabond" (197). The page references to Deleuze and Guattari's *Mille plateaux* given in the body of the text refer to the English translation by Brian Massumi; for each quotation in English, an endnote provides the original version in French with its page reference.

2. "[Le rhizome] n'est pas fait d'unités, mais de dimensions, ou plutôt de directions mouvantes. Il n'a pas de commencement ni de fin, mais toujours un milieu, par lequel il pousse et déborde." (31)

3. Although the verb *run* is used here in the sense of "controlling, managing, directing," (*American Heritage Dictionary* online), the idea of moving toward one point remains valid.

4. Although this passage is about Harrogate, Suttree's marginal friend, the sentence remains telling of the kind of attitude Suttree is bent on adopting.

5. This potential added meaning is of course linked to the reference to a watershed, which figuratively signals "a critical point that marks a division or a change of course, a turning point" (*American Heritage Dictionary* online).

6. To the question, "Has Suttree found his way at the end?" Robert L. Jarrett suggests the following: "the ending with Suttree on the road makes such a reading only a possibility, not a definitive solution to Suttree's dilemma" (62). Despite this qualification, there is little doubt that in this 1979 novel, Cormac McCarthy's perspective on movement and wandering is positive. There is definitely a sense of elation in ambulation which has obviously disappeared by the time of McCarthy's much later novel *The Road* (2006). Despite the title's programmatic emphasis on travel, vagrancy in *The Road*, owing to the historical context conjured up, has lost all implications of possibility and any link to the pleasures of transgression.

7. The river, as Vereen Bell puts it, "draw[s] all vanity, meaning, and illusion into it" (qtd. in Holloway 84).

8. "Le rhizome connecte un point quelconque avec un autre point quelconque" (31).

9. Translation mine. "Sélectionner les cas singuliers et les scènes mineures est plus important que toute considération d'ensemble" (77).

10. I decided to devote part of this essay to textual borders and initially worked on it before the publication of Béatrice Trotignon's essay, but am not surprised of this convergence as I feel I can make her remark mine: "The very first thing that comes to my mind when I think about borders and landscapes in a literary work are their *very* borders as texts and the word layouts—or wordscapes—on the page. I suppose it can all be blamed on my being French and on such seminal critical works as Gérard Genette's *Paratexts*..." (123).

11. The whole passage from where these expressions are taken reads: "On assiste à une transformation des substances et à une dissolution des formes... au profit des forces fluides, des flux, de l'air, de la lumière, de la matière qui font qu'un corps ou un mot ne s'arrêtent en aucun point précis.... Une matière plus immédiate, plus fluide et ardente que les corps et les mots.... La multiplicité des systèmes d'intensité se conjugue, se rhizomatise sur l'agencement tout entier, dès le moment qu'il est entraîné par ces vecteurs ou tensions de fuite.... Il y a des mots de passe sous les mots d'ordre. Des mots qui seraient comme de passage, des composantes de passage, tandis que les mots d'ordre marquent des arrêts, des compositions stratifiées, organisées.... [Il faut] transformer les compositions d'ordre en composantes de passages." (138-139) / "We witness a transformation of substances and a dissolution of forms... in favor of fluid forces, flows, air, light, and matter, such that a body or a word does not end at a precise point.... A matter more immediate, more fluid, and more ardent than bodies or words.... The multiplicity of systems of intensities conjugates or forms a rhizome throughout the entire assemblage the moment the assemblage is swept up by these vectors or tensions of flight. There are pass-words beneath order-words. Words that pass, words that are components of passage, whereas order-words mark stoppages or organized, stratified compositions.... [It is necessary] to transform the compositions of order into components of passage." (109-110)

12. "Et toujours suivre le rhizome par rupture, allonger, prolonger, relayer la ligne de fuite, la faire varier, jusqu'à produire la ligne la plus abstraite et la plus tortueuse à n dimensions, aux directions rompues. Conjuguer les flux déterritorialisés" (19).

13. Linking the motif of the rhizome with the image of the canal is a way for Deleuze and Guattari to oppose it more effectively to the constraining form of rigid arborescence: "Amsterdam, a city entirely without roots, a rhizome-city with its stem-canals" (15) and "Don't go for the root, follow the canal..." (19). The combined expression "canal-rhizome," used as such on page 20 of *Mille plateaux* (page 31 in the original French version), seems to impose itself when dealing with *Suttree* owing to the central symbolic role of the river in the novel.

14. "Où allez-vous ? d'où partez-vous ? où voulez-vous en venir ? sont des questions bien inutiles. ... [Elles impliquent] une fausse conception du voyage et du mouvement (méthodique, pédagogique, initiatique, symbolique...). Mais [il y a] une autre manière de voyager comme de se mouvoir, partir au milieu, par le milieu, entrer et sortir, non pas commencer ni finir" (35).

15. As betrayed by his uncle's reference to the boat by way of an indefinite pronoun: "he said that you were living in a houseboat or something" (15). Louise Jillett underlines on her part that the houseboat provides Suttree "a space adjacent to, but not within, the slum neighborhood, on the margins of the margins, as it were" (159).

16. See for instance: "It was full noon when he finished and he stood in the skiff for a moment" (8), "in the full light of autumn noon" (285), "in the wan daybreak" (377), "He watched the graying in the east, the soiled aurora" (385), "It was just dusk" (467).

17. Let us note here that, tellingly, if one crosses a bridge in *Suttree*, one will not find something definitely different on the other side: "The ragman looked. Across the river down the long aisle of arches lay the distant facing image of his own shelter" (98).

18. "*Here from the bridge the world below seems a gift of simplicity*" (5).

19. That the birds mentioned should be pigeons is both a realistic detail and a potent symbol: the pigeon is indeed a lowly, coarse version of a bird which is associated with groundedness and mendacity and often induces rejection. By describing its—albeit clattering—flight toward the sun, McCarthy seems to rehabilitate this castoff animal just as he redeems those discarded by society.

20. Sylvie Hanote and Hélène Chuquet refer to quotation marks as "marque-frontière [border markers]" (10); Nathalie Arnaud and Vincent Salbayre explain: "La frontière typographique matérialisée par les guillemets [est] immédiatement repérable par le lecteur, parfois même avant le déchiffrement du matériau verbal proprement dit [the typographical border materialized by quotations marks can be immediately spotted by readers, sometimes even before they decipher the contents of the verbal material itself]" (68); Laurence Rosier writes: "les critères syntactico-typographiques [des modes de discours] sont baladeurs [the syntactical and typographical criteria of speech modes are vagrant]" (4; my translations).

21. See for instance the passage where Horrogate's perspective, itself a deviation from the main focalization pattern, gives way to that of "two fishbutchers" (92), or the part where the text suddenly follows the "junkman" as the latter leaves Suttree (266-268).

22. This passage is too long to be quoted in full.

23. See pages 27-28, from "Jimmy Smith fell in with him to see him to the door" to "Suttree and Antisuttree, hand reaching to the hand."

24. Jarrett interprets this contradiction as follows: "Who is this 'I'? Apparently, the voice is the same as that of the prolegomenon, with its warning against dwelling upon the 'thing outside.'... [Yet] it may instead represent the reflective consciousness of Suttree, locating its own moral voice or working through its submergence in the dream visions of the unconscious. And in one sense, this advice may contradict Suttree's own experience: while his departure from McAnally is a flight or escape from death, it has only been by confronting death in the form of his own unconscious that Suttree is able to thus affirm and presumably reorient his life" (61-62).

25. "The drums under one corner were banjaxed and the shanty lay tilted in the water" (364).

26. "Aussi toutes les entreprises de déstratification... doivent-elles d'abord observer des règles concrètes d'une prudence extrême : toute déstratification trop brutale risque d'être suicidaire, ou cancéreuse, c'est-à-dire tantôt s'ouvre sur le chaos, le vide et la destruction, tantôt referme sur nous les strates qui se durcissent encore plus, et perdent même leurs degrés de diversité, de différenciation et de mobilité" (628). It may be added that in their introduction to *Mille plateaux*, Deleuze and Guattari more generally draw attention to the fact that rhizomes can have their own hierarchy and rigidity and therefore create despotic formations (20–30 in the French version). Suttree's suicidal drive is only one aspect of the way his lines of flight and vagrant mode of life run the risk of turning into a form of self-entrapment, a risk the end of the novel seems however partially to downplay.

27. "Chacun des éléments a sa propre dissolution, la terre a sa poussière, le feu sa fumée. L'eau dissout plus complètement. Elle nous aide à mourir totalement. [Each of the elements has its own form of dissolution; the earth has its dust, fire its smoke. Water dissolves more completely. It helps us die totally]" (125 ; my translation).

28. "L'eau mêle ses symboles ambivalents de naissance et de mort."

29. "[L]es Exclus de la raison, sans qu'on puisse savoir s'ils ne s'en excluent pas eux-mêmes, pour obtenir ce qu'elle ne peut leur donner, l'indiscernable, l'innommable avec lequel ils pourront se confondre."

30. "L'acte fondateur du roman américain... a été d'emporter le roman loin de la voie des raisons, et de faire naître ces personnages qui se tiennent dans le néant, ne survivent que dans le vide, gardent jusqu'au bout leur mystère et défient logique et psychologie."

ABSTRACTS

This essay interprets *Suttree*'s (1979) obsessional themes of vagrancy and in-betweenness, and their aesthetic inscription in the text by resorting to Gilles Deleuze and Felix Guattari's motif of the "canal-rhizome" as developed in *Mille plateaux* (1980). Close textual analysis reveals that, in parallel to his hero's embracing of social liminality in rebellion to his father's conservative value system based on law and order, McCarthy makes the ethical choice of "pass-words" over "order-words," of transforming "compositions of order" into "components of passage," a militant act of literary commitment. Moreover, the essay contends that the text's aesthetic choice of liminal forms is also meant to enable the reader to share the hero's metaphysical experience of the mysteries of death-in-life.

INDEX

Keywords: Cormac McCarthy, Suttree, Gilles Deleuze, Felix Guattari, rhizome, vagrancy, ambulation, liminality, in-betweenness

AUTHOR

MARIE-AGNÈS GAY

Marie-Agnès Gay is Professor of American literature at University Jean Moulin – Lyon 3, France. She is the author of *Épiphanie et fracture: l'évolution stylistique du point de vue narratif dans les romans de F. Scott Fitzgerald* (Paris: Didier Érudition, 2000) and conducts regular research on this modernist writer. She also regularly publishes articles on contemporary American writers (Allan Gurganus, Richard Ford—to whom she also devoted a monograph in 2007—, Percival Everett...) and on Asian American literature. She is particularly interested in the aesthetic inscription of dispersal, focusing on a stylistic approach to literary texts.